



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Christ in You
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For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love (Ephesians 3:14-17).

I did the math the other day and realized that I've been ordained to ministry for more than 40 years. In all that time, and for a decade or so before, while I was trying to discern my vocation in life, I've been a close observer of what Christians do: how they live and behave in ways that reflect what their true values are, within the walls of the church and in the world beyond. As you might imagine, what I've observed has been something of a mixed bag.

I've met some people who have been truly wonderful, for lots of different reasons.

Beyond the ordinary, demanding responsibilities of parenthood, for example, I've known Christians who nurtured and cared for children with special needs so severe that I could only marvel at their faithfulness. They showed such amazing grace in the midst of hardships that there was no other word to describe them but "saints," though they would be the last people to use that word about themselves.

I've seen spouses who cared for their husband or wife through some long and terrible illness—the kind of illness where pain takes on Job-like proportions, or the kind where the body stays strong for a long, long time, while the

mind seems to crumble away, slowly and unpredictably. All the while, these caregivers remained faithful—faithful to the spouse who might hardly know them after a time, and faithful to God. The sheer burden of caregiving drove them down to a place where they found they could stand, as Parker Palmer says, and the rock they stood upon was the steadfast love of God.

I've met doctors and lawyers who gave up what could have been lucrative practices with affluent patients and clients in order to care for people who could hardly afford to pay them, or paid them nothing at all, beyond what some charitable organization provided to support them. Other people, too, of all stripes—teachers and nurses and social workers and carpenters—lived far more modestly than they might have lived in order to look out for total strangers, because their hearts were more filled with compassion than consumerism. Though their work was often hard, they found courage to keep on going from the sheer satisfaction of doing God's work in the world.

I knew a missionary who spent decades in Latin America, and after she retired to her little bungalow in Bethel Park she was audited more than once by the IRS, simply because she gave away such a high proportion of her little fixed income that the auditors' red lights began to flash. Apparently, the IRS seldom saw such generosity, but my friend could document everything she gave away, so the outcome of an audit was just a newly-inspired agent of the federal government.

These are just some of the people I've met over the years, besides the many who embodied Christian values in

all sorts of little ways, here and there, throughout the course of their lives. They don't include all the people I've read or heard about: the caregivers, the mission workers, the peacemakers and agents of reconciliation, the prophets who stood up for the poor and oppressed, and those who spoke truth to power because they could not look the other way in the face of some awful injustice.

All these people, the ones I've known and admired up close and the ones I've just heard about and admired from afar, had one thing in common. Somehow, Jesus had gotten to all of them. They had what St. Paul calls the Spirit of Christ living in and through them. And other people could see it in them, though they usually could not see it in themselves. They were often blind to what others saw so clearly, because they didn't spend much time focusing on themselves, except to ask what more they could do. They always wanted to know how they might be falling short of the love God wanted them to show, and what they could do to be more faithful.

There's a kind of restlessness in many of God's saints, because they look around and see so much need in the world, and they're acutely aware that, no matter how much they do, there will always be more that needs to be done.

I'm talking about Christians this morning, but of course there are people of all faiths, and some with no religious faith at all, who could be described in similar ways. God's work gets done through all kinds of people, and that's because the Spirit of Christ dwells in places that might surprise some Christians. The Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit

of God, sometimes shows up more or less incognito, but that Spirit is always living and active, working hard to redeem and reconcile the world.

In my experience, the amount of God's work a person does tends to vary inversely with the credit that person claims for doing it. The people who do the most good are usually dissatisfied with their own efforts, while those who rest on their laurels and tell themselves and everyone else what good people they are tend to be moral and spiritual underachievers.

And there are plenty of those people in churches too.

In 50 years or so of observing Christians, I've seen more than enough to know why some people want nothing to do with the church. I've seen garden-variety pettiness, where people get wildly upset about things that hardly matter—changing a color scheme or some old way of doing things in the church, for example—but the same people seem catatonically unmoved by the kinds of things that upset Jesus: things like selfishness and self-righteousness, bigotry and prejudice, injustice and indifference to other people's suffering.

I've seen people who logged lots of time in the pew and yet managed to remain, as far as anyone could tell, largely impervious to Jesus and the gospel. Some who call themselves Christians are petty tyrants at home or at work, treating others in ways they themselves would never want to be treated. Some are as unfaithful to the people around them, including their own families, as they are unfaithful to God. And many Christians never put their tribal loyalties into

biblical perspective, so they're still full of partisan hypocrisies, excoriating behaviors in other people's tribes that they overlook or rationalize in their own.

But Jesus comes to seek and to save the lost, including all these people too, which is why he so often gets criticized for the company he keeps. That's been true from the beginning, as even a cursory reading of the gospels will show you.

The New Testament's twist on that criticism, though, is that people who look down on others are often more lost than those they look down upon. The older brother who stays home, dutifully but self-righteously tending to his chores, while his ne'er-do-well little brother runs off to Sin City, turns out to be as much in need of grace as the prodigal son. Maybe more, since he doesn't think he needs grace at all because, in his own mind, he's always been so good.

The most clueless Christian is the one who confesses everybody else's sins but barely notices his own, so he sees no need for his own repentance. He may offer up that perennial pseudo-confession once in a while: "I admit that I'm not perfect." But of course that's no confession at all, because no one ever suspected him of being perfect, and everybody knows that no one is perfect after all.

All these kinds of Christians—the obvious saints and conspicuous sinners, the character ideals and the clueless self-righteous—they're all part of the church. Which raises an obvious question: How do we become more like the one

kind of Christian and less like the other? Or to put it another way, how do we become more like Christ himself?

Lots of people seem to think that being a Christian boils down to trying a little harder to be better on the margins, in the hope that God will notice, and be impressed, and let us into heaven when all is said and done. But of course that's not the gospel message at all. The gospel message, as Bill Coffin used to say when he was the chaplain at Yale, is more like this: "I'm not okay, and you're not okay; but that's okay, because God loves us."

Amy Grant has an old song called "I Have Decided," where she sings

... I have decided,
Being good is just a fable,
I just can't cause I'm not able.
I'm gonna leave it to the Lord.

It's a bit of a tautology to say "I just can't cause I'm not able," but the sentiment is exactly right. We can't become more Christlike by ourselves because we're too weighed down with our baser impulses and our own self-interest. But the gospel is good news because it says that what we cannot do for ourselves, God can do for us. And God will do it. God will give us the Spirit of Christ, if only we want it—if only we're willing to let Christ dwell within us.

King David, who knew God, and therefore Christians believe he knew the Spirit of Christ implicitly, prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." David prayed that prayer when he knew he

had done wrong, and he knew that, left to his own devices, he would keep on doing wrong. But he also knew that God is good. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, as another of the psalms attributed to David says. And God is powerful—strong enough to make a new creation out of even the weakest of us; strong enough to turn around the most strong-willed among us, and point us in the direction of God’s own will.

People who are satisfied with themselves and the combination of interests and activities they’ve put together may not see any need to change. “Those who are well have no need of a physician,” Jesus says, but I’ve always thought he says it ironically, because God knows we’re all standing in the need of prayer. We all need the grace of God. We all need to become a new creation, whether we know it or not. Especially if we don’t know it.

But God is willing to make us new, if that’s what we want. “I stand at the door and knock,” Jesus says. Why not go to the door, then, and let him in? If the Spirit of Jesus already dwells within you, you know what good company he is. And if he doesn’t, or if you’re not sure, just invite him in, and let him move in and through you, and see what a difference he makes in your life.



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